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A Survey of the Criticisms of A.E. Housman's Poetry

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A SURVEY OF THE CRITICISMS OF A. E. HOUSMAN'S POETRY

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets, sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Haley's comet: literary critics are less common. And when, once in a century, or once in two centuries, the literary critic does appear--will some one in this home of mathematics tell me what are the chances that his appearance will be made among that small number of people who are called classical scholars? If this purely accidental conjunction occurred so lately as the eighteenth century in the person of Lessing, it ought to be a long while before it occurs again; and if so early a century as the twentieth is to witness it in another person, all I know is that I am not he."[1]

On the occasion of Housman's giving the lecture The Name and Nature of Poetry, he repeated the above passage from a lecture which he had given in the same house, twenty-two years previously. He is saying that only a few scholars are critics; certainly he does not claim to be one.

In his time as well, perhaps, as in all times, in the field of textual scholarship, Housman had few equals and fewer superiors. His translations

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[1]A. E. Housman, The Name and Nature of Poetry, Cambridge, England: The Macmillan Company, At the University Press, 1939, pp. 1-2.

and interpretations of both Greek and Latin scholars of antiquity are well known, and it was this very factor that made the scholars of four decades a little hesitant to speak out about his poetry. The half sober response to A Shropshire Lad made it very evident that the poetic minds were awaiting a critic who would have the courage to lead in either praise or condemnation of the book, and who would be scholarly enough to give the reasons for his convictions. Such a scholarly critic was perhaps entirely lacking in that decade. Hence, the earlier criticisms of his work are so rare, that, for the student of Housman, the few recorded are very valuable, but so inadequate that they leave him unconvinced and bewildered.

It is the purpose of this study to investigate the critical reputation of his poetry. To do this, its aims shall be (1) to give a comparative analysis of the criticisms that have been made, using Housman's verse as a means of examining these critical standards and their attitude toward his kind of poetry during the past forty-five years, (2) to make a personal investigation of his works, and (3) to decide the worth and comparative values of these criticisms in determining the place of Housman in the English poetic tradition in his relation to modern poetry.

Housman's first volume, A Shropshire Lad, in 1896, came during a period of physical, as well as literary, revolution in the entire British Empire. The small area which once had been "Great Britain" had grown to a vast unlimited empire. The close and narrow view of the Victorians had expanded in proportion until it too had no limitations. With this expansion came a burst of bonds for the literary minds.

Pope and his close knit school of neo-classicism which had dominated English thought during the eighteenth century had been superseded by Wordsworth and Coleridge and their romanticism which saw the dawn of the nineteenth. They, in turn, lost their place in the literary scene to several successive schools which rapidly rose to frenzied heights, only to pass as quickly, leaving less of permanency to the literary tradition of English literature than had the neo-classicists, or the Romanticists who by 1850 had become objects of ridicule.

These followed Victorianism with its social consciousness of the utilitarian theory--the greatest good to the greatest number--Pre-Raphaelitism, a bold and defiant reaction against the ugly and the "good" in Victorianism, and a reaching back to Romanticism, but a Romanticism that was emancipated from the morbid obsession of self, a Romanticism that had developed a more social outlook out of which beauty in art and life might blossom of itself into a justice and charity, and a simple dignity in the relationship of man with man. Then came aestheticism, symbolism, and the mystic cult.

Housman appeared in the midst of the declining years of the first full bloom of symbolism. He came with a poetry different from any of the cults, so different that no critics have yet fully defined its type. It is not Neo-classic, Romantic, Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite, Aesthetic, Symbolic, or Mystic. His knowledge was too all-inclusive to be a disciple of Pope; unlike Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron he had no new poetic theory and no political axe to grind; Carlyle, with his Sartor Resartus, was not from Housman's world; Ruskin and Rossetti were entirely too sensuous and passion-

ate for such a self-disciplined nature as Housman's; the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde was not his creed; and he saw no use for symbols when simple words carefully arranged could so clearly express a desired image or thought.

A Shropshire Lad came at a time when the world was suffering from growing pains, too rapid growth, premature development. Such rapid growth and development left little time for sober reflective thought on literary criticism. But the time was soon to come when intellectual minds needed an escape from that growth, and the great question then arose as to which the best works of literary art would be. Would it be the symbol, expressed as a misty, vague, suggestive narrative verse, or would it be a dreamy genuineness and simplicity similar to that for which Wordsworth waged his revolutionary battle? Though he contributed to the idea of resorting to the vernacular language of the common man, only in practice, not in theory, he followed the mood of the Romanticists, perhaps, more than any other school of poetic thought.

His poetry, from A Shropshire Lad in 1896 until his Last Poems in 1922, spans a quarter of a century, and that quarter was tumultuous. By the time Last Poems was published a new poetry had arisen, a poetry from the creative genius of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, James Joyce, and the others of the new movement who were given to express in symbols the desperation that came over thinking people who found their hopes blighted when the conflict of the latter part of this second decade of the twentieth century was over. This mental misery which could find no clue leading out of this chaotic present is reflected in their works. Their poetry belongs to an intellectual climate,

appreciated by people herded in cities.

In this new age Housman found himself outside any school. He, as well as W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, and Ralph Hodgson, was apparently unaffected by the New Poetry. They were among the poets who were simple poets, finding beauty away from the anxious concerns of our time, seeking in nature and imagination escape from the disappointments and horrors of the conflict, and it remains for posterity to type his poetry and place it in the English tradition.

From Grant Richards' Housman, 1897-1936, we get the following condensed paragraph of his life:

> Alfred Edward Housman, the eldest son of Edward Housman, a Bromsgrove solicitor, was born in 1859 at the Valley House Fockbury, Worcestershire. Educated at Bromsgrove School and St. John's College, Oxford, he entered the Patent Office in 1882. Ten years later he became Professor of Latin at University College, London. A Shropshire Lad was published in 1896. In 1911 he left the University of London to become Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge. In 1922 Last Poems was published. He died in 1936. In the same year More Poems appeared, and in 1937, A. E. H., Some Poems, Some Letters and a Personal Memoir by his brother, Laurence Housman.[2]

To the above could be added the following information:

At Oxford he was exposed to the inspiring lectures of Ruskin, and to the liberal politics of the time--Gladstone the avowed enemy of the Tory Disraeli, Lord Peel, and others. The conflict of the election of 1880 made a deep and lasting impression upon him. He saw the struggle between economic and social groups and there was resolving in him a doubt of the rightness of

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[2]Grant Richards, Housman, 1897-1936, London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1941.

things, a melancholy which, upon his failure in "Greats" in Oxford, became a definite habit, and the following years, which he spent as a civil service clerk at the Patent Office, 1882-1892, were spent in almost uncommunicative meditation and concentration. This evidently was his Gethsemane and ended only when he became Professor of Latin at University College of London in 1892.

On return to academic life he could be found contributing poems to magazines, writing papers for the college Literary Society--papers which were satirically critical of Tennyson, Burns, Erasmus, Darwin, Swinburne, and "The Spasmodic School"--Matthew Arnold and Campbell came in for a little less satire than the others. Arnold he granted to be a critic a little greater than the average.

In 1911 he was appointed to the Kennedy Professorship of Latin at Cambridge which he held until his death in 1936. The testimonials which secured him this appointment were remarkable both for the imminence of their signatories in the world of scholarship and for the manner in which their recipient had secured the recognition accorded him. His failure in his University course, followed by ten years of separation from academic life, in which he studied incessantly on his own time, was crowned with the success of his passing the exam for his B. A. This enabled him to keep the necessary connection with his University which allowed him to take the degree of M. A. By his writing in the Journal of Philology, the Classical Review, and other learned publications he had also established his reputation among the scholars not only of his own country, but of Europe and America

as well.

Honors came from various universities. Glasgow University had offered him the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Law as early as 1905; St. Andrew's did the same in 1922; Cambridge, Liverpool, North Wales, all of which he refused. The one refusal which is hard, even today, to understand was his refusing the Order of Merit offered by His Majesty.

His letter to the King's secretary, declining the honor is enlightening:

> With all gratitude for His Majesty's most kind and flattering wish to confer upon me the Order of Merit, I humbly beg permission to decline this honour. I hope to escape the reproach of thanklessness or churlish behavior by borrowing the words in which an equally loyal subject, Admiral Cornwallis, declined a similar mark of the Royal favour: 'I am,unhappily, of a turn of mind that would make my receiving that honour the most unpleasant thing imaginable.'

He died during the Easter season in 1936. He had no claims to the consolation of religion, preferring to express the belief that life has no conscious hereafter. He is buried at Ludlow, and in the chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, a memorial tablet has been placed with its inscription in his beloved Latin.

After his death, his brother Laurence in 1936 edited More Poems and Thirty Unpublished Poems, and in 1939 The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman. Both Laurence and his sister, Kathryn Symons, have made his works a labor of love. Being a devoted brother and sister made it hard to be a fair, unprejudiced, and disinterested critic.

Several of those who loved him wrote about him, one or two enemies contributed adverse criticism, and a few of the better known critics of the

time attempted brief impartial criticisms of his works, but until recently no real critics have attempted to give a disinterested overview of his works, evaluating their findings on the principles of really great critical works of all ages. There remains the problem of minute analysis, tracing the origin of his thoughts and placing it in direct relation to the school from which it derived. That objective will be the problem of this paper.

CHAPTER II

A SURVEY OF CRITICISMS OF THE POET'S WORKS

When A Shropshire Lad appeared in 1896, Housman was thirty-seven years old, and it was to be twenty-six years, at the age of sixty-three, before he published another volume. A Shropshire Lad came at an inopportune time. Both practical and poetic minds were involved in violent conflicts. The practical minds were thinking of politics, economics, and the Empire, and the poetic minds were trying to interpret aestheticism, symbolism, and mysticism.

Pater and Wilde were writing of lush and beautiful things, and Symons and Yeats were hiding the truth in the form of symbols. Pater, with an intellectual and detached zeal, was teaching an esoteric faith through studies of civilization and souls. These studies culminated in the Studies in the History of the Renaissance, which spoke openly against the fast disappearing cult of Ruskin and his message. Pater's hedonism made for the death of the individual along a path blossoming with roses and strewn with ashes. It was urged by a more anxious impatience of life than by the smiling aspects of epicureanism. Wilde was a pupil of Pater's and followed patently his master's views.

The symbolism of Symons and Yeats, as well as that of the French writers, was being read and pondered over by the intelligent upper classes.

In Yeats' The Wanderings of Oisin the delicacy of his subtle art is

steeped in imaginative mysticism. It possesses precious gifts of nature; it raises with words the spell of a mysterious atmosphere; but his works become increasingly intellectual. The meaning of the entire sect of symbolists was too elusive for an ordinary mind.

With the symbolists Housman had no place. His A Shropshire Lad contained no mystery. It was simple enough for the most unenlightened farm lad and classic enough for the most enlightened scholar.

Preceded only by a short statement in The Times of March 27, 1896, Hubert Bland was the first to make comment on A Shropshire Lad. In the New Age of April 16, 1896 he expressed the view that Housman's artistic range lay within narrow limits, but within those limits his work was only a little short of consummation. There were many flawless stanzas and not a few flawless poems. This early conception of his poetry was long lived. Almost all of his critics have allowed the same thing to be true.

A long favorable review appeared in the Bookman of June, 1936.[1] "Here is a writer who stands outside of the poetic vogue of the day. I have seen no book for years that breathes at least more spontaneity, and very few with as much individuality."

As to the individuality everyone would agree. It could not have been more individual than it was. But as to the spontaneity there would be much hesitation before concurrence.

In the first place Housman in no small degree could be called spon-

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[1]Annie Macdonell, "New Writers," Bookman (London), Vol. 10 (1896), p. 83.

taneous. As far as can be found, he never committed an act of spontaneity. His manner was entirely studied, precise, and formal. On the memorable occasion of Frank Harris' first introduction to him by Austin Harrison, then editor of The English Review, Harris, Harrison, and Middleton were completely disillusioned because his manner was so reticent and reserved as to be almost lacking in decent graciousness.[2] It would naturally follow that his poetry would have none of the exuberant spontaneity that is often attributed to a certain kind of the best poets.

Miss Macdonell continued: "Mr. Housman's technical merits might easily be surpassed, but his rhythms and forms call for no criticism. They are simple, rough, never subtle, save with the subtlety that catches and reflects the moral and sets the matter to the right tune." The last statement in this is completely in accord with that of Herbert Sherman Gorman[3] who thinks that his mastery of form has become such a subdued art that it reaches the high beauty of simplicity.

But her statement that his "technical merits might easily be surpassed" leaves us in doubt as to what Miss Macdonell meant by "technical merits." In the Bookman of October, 1898, it was said of him that "his technique judged by his purpose and plan is almost flawless."[4] The editors of Adventures in English tell us that his poems are "extremely finished in technique," and John Drinkwater in his Muse in Council said that it would be im-

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[2]Frank Harris, Latest Contemporary Portraits, "A Talk with A. E. Housman," New York: The MacCauley Company, 1927, p. 281.
[3]Herbert Sherman Gorman, "Poems and Lyrics," Outlook, Vol. CXXXIII (1923), p. 356.
[4]Bookman (London), Vol. 15 (1898), p. 27.

possible to improve his technique.[5] Perhaps Miss Macdonell had something more subtle in mind than what is most often thought when the word "technical" is applied.

When she said they are never subtle, we would wish to correct her again. In the poem "Astronomy" there is nothing to convey to us the knowledge that he is referring to his brother who is buried in Africa--a veteran of a battle there; the second stanza,

> For pay and medals, name and rank,
> Things that he has not found,
> He hove the Cross to heaven and sank
> The pole-star underground,

conveys very little of this to us. There can be found much subtlety, few mystic symbols, but certainly everything he says is not evident.

She continued: "This book of lyrics has continuity. You can pick out a story from it. They are essentially lyrical outbursts of feeling often elliptical, cries and sighs from which one may catch a name and the hint of a story. Original as he is now and then, you may hear familiar voices in his verse." She thought that if he had been given to making moral reflections rather than pictures he could have been named a kinsman of Clough. The last four lines of Clough's "In a Lecture Room" is certainly a moral reflection of doubt:

> Why labour at the dull mechanic oar,
> When the fresh breeze is blowing,
> And the strong current is flowing,
> Right onward to the 'Eternal Shore'?

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[5]John Drinkwater, Muse In Council, "A. E. Housman's Last Poems," Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1925, p. 245.

And then the clear, vivid picture from Housman:

> There, when the turf in springtime flowers,
> With downward eye and gazes sad,
> Stands amid the glancing showers
> A jonquil, not a Grecian lad.

His lyric swing, as if born on the body's motion in the open road with the wind playing round, she said, could have come from Heine's Song Book. "But the exquisiteness of Heine and his poisonous sting are both absent. His methods, though unperfected, are Heine's in the main: and his matter very much the same." The love of fresh hearts in the springtime, the strife of young passions, the struggle of man with the soil, the homesickness for the West country felt in the dusty streets, from these Housman has woven his verse. Sturdy vigour and pervading melancholy are always there and one hardly seems to give way to the other.

An anonymous writer in the Bookman of October, 1898, voiced the same thought that Housman may have been inspired by Heine, but was quick to assert that he had not imitated him. He, too, said that in A Shropshire Lad Housman had used his almost faultless lyric gift for the honor of his West country, for the revelation of country hearts, of rustic passion and tragedy.[6]

William Morton Payne in the Dial of October, 1897, stated that "A Shropshire Lad is extremely simple in diction which strikes a thin, but pure lyric note."[7]

An unknown author in The Athenaeum of October 8, 1898[8] followed with

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[6]Bookman (London), Vol. 15 (1898), p. 27.
[7]William Morton Payne, The Dial, Vol. 23 (1897), p. 188.
[8]The Athenaeum, Vol. II (1898), p. 488.

the observation that in A Shropshire Lad "Mr. Housman has attained a simplicity . . . which, with his brave outlook on life, the frank loves and hates of lads and lasses, makes a book distinguished above the ruck. It is that sort of easy reading which is hard writing."

Now we come to the last and one of the most enthusiastic criticisms written on A Shropshire Lad. William Archer was, like Gow, a very close friend of Housman's, but he was a scholar as well, and although he wrote his criticism as an enthusiastic admirer, he made some very pertinent observations as a disinterested critic.[9]

Most of the other critics have made Housman a rustic poet, a simple poet. Archer said that he is no Burns singing at his plough. He is a man of culture. "He moves in his rustic garb with no clod-hopper's gait, but with the ease of an athlete; and he has an Elziver classic in the pocket of his smock frock. . . Never was there less of a pastoral poet in the artificial, Italian-Elizabethan sense of the word. The Shropshire of Mr. Housman is no Arcadia, no Sicily, still less a courtly pleasaunce peopled with beribboned nymphs and swains." It is real; tragic, rapturous realization, bitter resentment of life. To Housman Nature is an "exquisitely seductive, inexorably malign enchantress." He has "clothed life's ironies in the bucolic attire of an English County."

Archer continued with the thought that Housman finds expression in curiously simple, original, and expressive verse. He attempts no metrical

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[9]William Archer, Poets of the Younger Generation, London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1902, p. 184.

arabesques, no verbal enamelling. His meters are homely, ". . . yet in their little variations, their tremulous cadences, we recognize the touch of the born meterist. Mr. Housman's chief technical strength, however, lies in the directness and terseness of his style. There is verve and fibre in every line he writes, and of superfluous tissue not a trace. . . His diction and his methods are absolutely his own. He echoes no one, borrows no one's technical devices. If he reminds us of any other poet, it is (now and then) of Heine; yet he is English of the English. We divine his culture in the very simplicity of his style; but (beyond a single allusion to Milton, . . . and a single line adopted from Shakespeare) we find no direct evidence of his ever having read another English poet. His verse might well be the glorified offspring of the most unsophisticated popular poetry--the chap-book ballad or the rustic stave."

Archer, more scholarly than the others before him, divided Housman's A Shropshire Lad into three main elements: A stoical pessimism; a dogged, rather than an exultant, patriotism; and a wistful cynicism. His pessimism he expressed in the stanza

> Therefore, since the world has still
> Much good, but much less good than ill;
> And while the sun and moon endure
> Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
> I'd face it as a wise man would
> And train for ill and not for good.

and the third stanza of another poem:

> Now, and I muse for why and never find the reason,
> I pace the earth, and drink the air, and feel the sun.
> Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
> Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

His patriotism Archer illustrated in the last stanza of "The Day of Battle":

> Therefore though the best is bad,
> Stand and do the best, my lad;
> Stand and fight and see your slain,
> And take the bullet in your brain.

Archer's omission of the last stanza of the first poem in A Shropshire Lad is a fault:

> O, God will save her, fear you not;
> Be you the men you've been,
> Get you the sons your father got,
> And God will save the Queen.

Certainly this would express patriotism, perhaps more exultant than dogged.

The third element, wistful cynicism, Archer thought expressed itself in the fact "that he dwells not harshly, but rather with compassion upon the mutability of human feeling. The ease with which the dead are forgot, the anguish of love unrequited, and the danger that long life may mean slow degradation."

> There's chaps from the town and the field and the till and the cart,
> And many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave,
> And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,
> And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave.

This idea is strongly expressed in "An Athlete Dying Young," as well as in the dialogue between a dead man and his living friend, the gist of which lies in the friend's last answer:

> "Yes, lad, I lie easy,
> I lie as lads would choose;
> I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
> Never ask me whose."

"It is long since we have caught just this note in English verse--the note of intense feeling uttering itself in language of unadorned precision, uncontorted truth. Mr. Housman is a vernacular poet, if there ever was one. He employs scarcely a word that is not understanded by the people."

This is in perfect agreement with our former statement, but is it not possible that that "unadorned precision" for the common man, could be quite an elusive and adorned expression for the more cultivated mind? Housman himself says in his The Name and Nature of Poetry "to transfuse emotion, not to transmit thought, is the peculiar function of poetry."

Perhaps there is much in Housman that seems evident but which is not all as, in reality, it seems. There is no contortion, but we are not convinced that there is no adornment.

Archer's greatest adverse criticism of Housman was in 1898 when he admitted his limitation in subject-matter by saying, "There is no reason why Mr. Housman should not put off his rustic mask and widen his subject matter."

That was the criticism that was to follow him up to the last poem. He never did widen his subject-matter and he retained his inscrutable rustic mask.

A Shropshire Lad was read and enjoyed by all classes in England and it enjoyed a certain amount of popularity in America as well. Its rusticity appealed to the farmer lad because of his close contact with its suggested memories, and to the urban lad because of his yearning for the simplicity of those experiences that had been denied to him.

The classic form appealed to the more sophisticated and there was

nothing in its content to shock even the most conservative minded. There was a pessimism that held for the more mature minds what his strife of youthful passion held for the lads and lasses. This was a struggle that we need not hope to win, but into which we are from life's necessity thrown and from necessity we must fight it, only to lose.

The popularity of A Shropshire Lad waned after the first eighteen months and for a while it seemed that it would become a forgotten book. It gradually returned, however, and became a minor classic. The critics were not extolling it, neither were they condemning it. It assumed the role of a "book of habit."

Into this passive atmosphere came another collection of poems from Housman, and it brought forth more comment on A Shropshire Lad than had that book evoked at the time of its own publication. This collection he called Last Poems and the criticisms on it were more a protest against the author for daring to spoil their small classic, A Shropshire Lad, by adding to it verses of doubtful quality, than any fault finding of the verse itself. This perhaps was an example of the English mind which wishes to hold to the things that have been tried and found good and is slow to accept the new.

When Housman wrote his Last Poems he had passed the star and had come to the way of recessional. He was now sixty-three years of age, and instead of growth in Last Poems he gave poetry almost on an exact plane to that of A Shropshire Lad twenty-six years before. John Drinkwater gave the following two stanzas, and made the observation that they were the expression of the tragic mood which pervaded this entire volume (and certainly a tragic

mood pervaded A Shropshire Lad):

> Now dreary downs the eastern light,
> And fall of eve is drear,
> And cold the poor man lies at night,
> And so goes out the year.
>
> Little is the luck I've had,
> And oh, 'tis comfort small
> To think that many another lad
> Has had no luck at all.[10]

"To say that the technique of Last Poems is better than that of the best of the Shropshire Lad would be to say that the impossible had been achieved. But it is as good, and more consistently good. The little poem at the head of this paper is perfectly done, and hardly a page of the book fails to match it. The old manner is often here, but it is no less asserting because Mr. Housman himself happens to have done it before."[11]

This is in vivid contrast to Edmund Sapir's review in the Dial of August, 1923. He thought Last Poems "as bitter as it is wistful, and as gentle and strong to break futile things as a man's strength or a twig." But he contrasted it unfavorably with A Shropshire Lad. "A Shropshire Lad sang out honestly from the gallow's heights, gave sadness and the beauty of the countryside a new hardness, and besides its clear, silver, inexorable voice all the organ music of aesthetes quickly hushed into dead velvet. Last Poems speaks with slightly new accents, while telling of the same spiritual country. A Shropshire Lad drew exact lines on the land and noted carefully the passionate steps of puppets, each on his given line, each to

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[10] John Drinkwater, The Muse in Council, p. 245.
[11] Ibid., p. 245.

his useless point. In Last Poems there is less drama, less interested amusement in the phrases, a more explicit concern with the journey's end. Where A Shropshire Lad was aesthetically grim and waved its pessimistic formula with a blitheness that was not mockery, the later poems reflect and mutter and sigh. 'Tis the same tale but there is a different telling on't.

Drinkwater introduced the new idea that, though Housman's poetry is an expression of a tragic mood, because it is expressed, it becomes no longer despair. Housman as a youth saw much bitterness in the promise of life and now that he had passed to maturity the old fears have proved themselves. But Drinkwater thought that such perfect expression as Housman had given in Last Poems purged despair of its own disastrousness and transfigured it into a mood that knows, not only to endure, but, even to delight. He felt that if Housman told us what he thought of the world it would not be an inspiring story but given to us in terms of an exquisite poetic art, "we know that there is beauty which is not at the mercy of any philosophical denial."

Perhaps John Drinkwater was the first to analyze Housman's poetry from a psychological standpoint. His very brief analysis is not to be the last of its kind. The more recent critics are all touching the psychological aspects of Housman. John Peale Bishop thought his tragic mood was the result of his abandonment of Propertius for Manilius. Whitridge thought his pessimism was a considered philosophy rather than an instinctive reaction to the clutch of circumstances. These are new critics of Housman and their approach on a more extended scale was, like Drinkwater's, a psychological one.

Another critic that spoke within the age of the Last Poems was R. W. Postgate. In an article in The Freeman of December 13, 1922, he spoke of Housman as "A Defeated Poet." Postgate felt that this defeatism was caused by capitalism. He said that capitalism could not use Housman so it sterilized him; that Housman had begun by a genuine desire to right injustice, to avenge innocent suffering but he abandoned the struggle.

There is really very little evidence that Housman exerted a great deal of his energy in the struggle to avenge innocent suffering or to change the capitalistic system. If he were ever interested, he relinquished the struggle with only a small expended effort. He seemed contented to remain in the peaceful security of his own nook and to let the rest of the world be its "brother's keeper."

In sympathetic alignment with Drinkwater came G. H. Clark in the Sewanee Review of March, 1923. He cited the poem "The West" and said that it is symbolic sunset, "verses that will have the heart out of your breast"; "Hell Gate," that is an imaginative adventure of extraordinary fascination, told with severe and sombre beauty, brooding rebel-wonder.

Clark said of Housman's Last Poems that they search the heart. They do so with insistent power which is the unknown quantity in the work of our first lyricists who are not many.

He placed them on an equal rating with A Shropshire Lad. Both volumes contain unimpeachable poetry, sensitively conceived and exquisitely phrased. There is companionably courageous melancholy in the face of "life's more minute" as the poet contemplates "the unescapable vicissitudes of all human

experience, the inexorable changefulness of the soul in its effort to find the way to an authentic freedom. The poems are memorably wistful, indeed hauntingly so, with a pity fibred irony that makes for fortitude and a diction so novel that in its melodies and connotations that fortitude becomes akin to happiness."

MacDonald, in the Queen's Quarterly, applied to Housman's poetry Milton's words, "simple, sensuous, and passionate."[12] He gave as a difference in Shropshire Lad and Last Poems: in the latter the spring has changed to autumn. The earlier lyrics are remarkable for the vivid colors Housman delights in, gold, silver, scarlet, red, aqua, the white snow, and cherry and hawthorn bloom. In Last Poems the grey of mists, black and russets, tones of autumn predominate.

Priestley in the London Mercury of December, 1922, had said that "Housman had no taste for metrical experiments." MacDonald showed how "Housman uses twenty-one different measures in the sixty-three poems of Shropshire Lad. Only nine of these measures recur once or oftener in the forty-one lyrics that make up the Last Poems. Two of these are used in five poems, one in three, and one in two, and five in one each, no less than eighteen measures."

James Brannin in the Sewanee Review[13] had much to say in praise of Housman's substance and form. He compared his works to those of William

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[12] J. T. MacDonald, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Queen's Quarterly, Vol. XXXI (1923), p. 114-137.

[13] James Brannin, "Alfred Housman," Sewanee Review, Vol. XXXIII (1925), p. 191.

Johnson-Cory, Dr. Bridges, and Lionel Johnson. According to him Housman's lyric utterances have completeness and perfection. He is comparable to Heine and at times even to Catullus. His words are simple revelations of exquisite feeling.

Concerning this form, Brannin was very much in agreement with MacDonald and he illustrated it in the two following stanzas:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden,
And many a light foot lad.

By brooks too wide for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.

Brannin exclaimed, "Twenty-four significant words, twenty-four beats in simple Heinesque rhythm. Each word takes its beat squarely and evenly, each pause is at the end of the line, and every end of the line is a pause, with a strong sense-stress on the rightly vowelled but unaffected Saxon rhymes. Only so brief a thing, only so delicate a thing, could be, should be, so formally perfect but how perfect it is."

Brannin's thought continued: Like others of the great lyricists, Housman can use the outworn commonplace with a sincerity which makes the commonplace a vehicle for a revelation of his deepest and finest feeling in all its depth and fineness. The commonplace if touched by him becomes something rich and strange:

Lovers lying two by two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.

Brannin thought his Last Poems begins, appropriately enough, with a descant on the old phrase:

> We'll to the woods no more,
> The laurels are all cut.

These are simple words, no descriptive adjectives, no adornment, just a futility expressed with verbs and nouns predominating.

"There is no over-refinement of drama under the simple rhythm of Housman. His dramatic problems are simple, universal. The experiences of his simple persons may have had form and substance in many a human heart. When a dead lad asks his comrade about his old interest in the life above the grass, he gets frank and straightforward answers until he asks this:

> 'Is my girl happy,
> That I thought hard to leave,
> And has she tired of weeping
> As she lies down at eve?'

And he is told

> "Ay, she lies down lightly,
> She lies not down to weep:
> Your girl is well contented
> Be still, my lad, and sleep.'

And the swift movement of that last line is explained:

> 'I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
> Never ask me whose'"

"That turning of the comrade in 'Be still, my lad, and sleep,' illustrates the dramatic, or rather the epic, quality of Housman's lyrics. It is elemental, racial in its intense personality. . . It is bittersweet which blooms all through these pages."

He adds that there is courage, not cynicism, in this:

Now hollow fires burn out to black,
And lights are getting low:
Square your shoulders, lift your pack,
And leave your friends and go.

Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread,
Look not left nor right:
In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the right.

And there is all the glory and all the tragedy in the lines on "Illic Jacet."

Oh hard is the bed they have made him,
And common the blanket and cheap;
And there he will lie as they laid him:
Where else could you trust him to sleep?

To sleep when the bugle is crying
And cravens have heard and are brave,
When mothers and sweethearts are sighing
And lads are in love with the grave.

Oh dark is the chamber and lonely,
And lights and companions depart;
But lief will he love them and only
Behold the desire of his heart.

And low is the roof, but it covers
A sleeper content to repose;
And far from his friends and his lovers
He lies with the sweetheart he chose.

Brannin said that Last Poems are equally as good as A Shropshire Lad. "Housman is as fresh and new as if no one had sung his tunes before and indeed no one has, but the difference is subtle and personal."

Brannin thought that Housman did not give you the impression of consciously avoiding novelty; rather he kept in tune a perfect instrument on which he knew how to play gracefully, simply, almost carelessly, but with a sure authoritative carelessness. Housman's melodies are as regular as a

theme in Bach, unobtrusive as measures of Dante; these plain Saxon monosyllables marching to an even beat appear to be as unconscious, and are really as simple, as the speech of mountaineers and children. The artist is so completely under the dominion of his thought and feeling that his perfect workmanship, like the workmanship of Catullus, seems a thing of chance.

Like Horace, like Ronsard, and Herrick and Burns, Housman says the old things with a difference. Man makes too eager an effort to say what he himself has not thought or imagined. The originality of Housman is something subtle. Brannin concluded with: "The property of the poet in his own verses is vested in some other right than in the first discovery of thought. From Housman you come away with a suspicion that poetry is, after all, a miracle; that it happens; that when it does not happen, nothing helps; but when it does happen, nothing matters."

William A. Norris in The New Republic of February 28, 1923, told us "No one, I think, could expect anything new in a new book of Housman. An exquisite and self conscious pessimism, such as his, is the last refinement of poetry. Once achieved, it is changeless. It sees the finger at the lips of joy, and looks beyond the flower to the fruit and beyond that to dissolution. It has stripped the world of all the illusions which support life; but is poignant and healthy in proportion to its love of those illusions."[14]

Norris continued: "After Mr. Housman had written A Shropshire Lad

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[14]William A. Norris, "Last Poems," The New Republic, Vol. 34, (1923), p. 26.

there was nothing else in the world for him to do. In its blundering way the world seemed to know it; he became a minor classic. To the critic A Shropshire Lad was soon a closed book, as much as any book in a spoken tongue is ever closed to criticism. Now Mr. Housman has himself opened the book and slipped between its covers, quietly and with a deprecatory gesture, half a hundred more poems. But it is the same book, unchanged in any way, for such poetry is not measured by bulk. It is irrelevent to say that this latter half of his book contains no poem so nearly perfect as 'An Athlete Dying Young' and:

'Overhead the aspen leaves
His rainy-sounding silver leaves.'"

"It would be irrelevant to do anything at all but read the book, were it not for those apostles of progress in literature who are already calling Last Poems the echo of A Shropshire Lad and accusing the author of weeping through forty one poems of the mortality of mortals."

Norris granted that the addition of forty-one poems to the original sixty-three accentuated Housman's narrowness of subject-matter as well as his singleness of purpose. There are many poems in the new version that might be called alternate versions of poems in A Shropshire Lad. Moreover, his technique being an amazingly delicate instrument with four strings, is less novel in a hundred poems than in half that number.

It may not be strictly true that the single poem is the unit by which a poet should be judged, but certainly the adventurous facility of our younger poets has led us to pay more attention to the author's work as a

whole than to the few best examples of that work. "Mr. Housman suffers by such scrutiny."

"Housman's poems are based on one formula: life is as short as it is vivid; its end as inevitable as its beauty. This platitude is written large on the face of A Shropshire Lad where the lass is wooed in the grave of her dead lover, where the young man does not look too long at the sunset over Wales, and where the better of two lads is hanged and the other turns gladly to friends who still face the daylight. Life goes like this, not only on Bredon Hill and Wenlock Edge, but the world over."

Norris said that only he who has a great zest for life can be a great pessimist. If we ask for only a little we are apt to get it and be satisfied. Housman's reverence for beauty leads as surely to a delicate and constant economy of phrase and cadence, as it does to the occasionally brutal statements of the inadequacy of existence.

"In this Housman differs from Swinburne, with his monotonous prodigality, under which his lamentations become a mood, and then a disease. It is significant that Housman's satirical range is limited, while within his few conventional patterns he is so discriminating of values as to achieve surprising variations of effect. Neither Marvell nor Herrick nor any other seventeenth century poet, was more exquisite in his use of the tetrameter couplet and quatrain."

Norris quoted from "An Athlete Dying Young" and said that this in A Shropshire Lad excels in "delicacy of tracing" any eight lines in his later works:

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

Norris closed his criticism with a wishful sigh that little will be said of Last Poems. "It is not food for the multitude, and the less attention there is drawn to it now, the less irrelevant foolishness will be uttered. Mr. Housman is already the priceless possession of a relatively small body of readers. He can never be anything more or anything less than that."

In truth Norris' last statement proved conclusive and prophetic. Last Poems were verses too similar to those in A Shropshire Lad to create any sensation of a new book. The mood was the same; the form and the subject matter were identical to the former book. He had used the same commonplace and the same dramatic problems. This served only to evoke more comment on the former volume. One could say that it only served as cause for a revival of A Shropshire Lad, and some critics wished to slip Last Poems within the covers of that first little volume and close it quickly and silently before too much irrelevant foolishness was said.

Housman had given poems on an exact level of the Shropshire Lad. In the twenty-six years that had elapsed since it was published he had changed neither his technique nor his subject matter. It was to be the same with everything he wrote. Either by choice or by necessity he kept close to his

young hearts, to his Shropshire ideal, and in consequence his poetry was never to reach far beyond the bounds of his youthful experiences.

When The Name and Nature of Poetry was published in 1933, A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems were still very much in the public mind. Housman's utterances in this lecture were very disillusioning to his admirers. There was nothing "mad" in either of his volumes of verse, and his theory was so different to his practice that it evoked much comment.

T. S. Eliot in The Criterion of October 1933 reviewed Housman's The Name and Nature of Poetry. He thought that it would not necessarily follow because Housman does not maintain in his poetry what he advocates in his lecture, that it is not good theory. Eliot thought that there are surprisingly few things that can be said about poetry, and of these few the most turn out either to be false or to say nothing of significance.

Eliot thought Housman capable of recognizing poetry; that he showed as sensitive and refined a perception as any human being can aspire to.

Because he felt that no one has answered the questions "What is meant by meaning?" and "What is meant by intellect?" Eliot could not deny Housman's assertion that "meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not." His observations led him to believe that different poets compose in very different ways, and his own experience led him to believe that Housman is recounting the authentic processes of a real poet.

Concerning Housman's lecture, The Name and Nature of Poetry, T. S. Eliot said that he had "naughtily neglected to take cognizance of current critical theories." This confirms our own suspicion that he is entirely outside any

current theories. In fact his lecture failed to startle with anything new, and excited only a little with a confirmation of the old. His way of expressing what he did express caused a minor ripple of excitement but his lecture had nothing in it that would vitally sustain and perpetuate it as worthwhile critical standards. In his poetical compositions he does not confirm the few points that he made in his lecture.

Gerald Bullet in the Week End Review of June 3, 1933, regretted that Housman by exposing the ambiguity of the word 'poetry' has left us no name for that element in writing which yields us the experience called 'poetry.'

Housman's statement that the majority of civilized mankind notoriously and indisputably do not possess the organ by which poetry is perceived, is strongly attacked by many critics.

Poetry, according to Bullet, may be more physical than intellectual but not more physical than mental. Bullet thought that some of Housman's statements in this lecture may have been misunderstood. When Housman said that "Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not," he was perhaps using a provocative way of saying that poetry is an appeal rather to the imagination than to the reason; but Bullet was quick to affirm his opinion that it is legitimate and useful to attach the term 'meaning' to the purely poetic content, or effect, of a poem. Bullet admitted that Housman does not think there are such things as poetical ideas, but that truths and observations should be expressed in verse. The poetic element for Housman is the mystery that remains when the specifically intellectual element has been in

feeling, but not in fact, removed. "Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it."

Bullet thought Housman weakened his theory by his occasional hastiness in his choice of terms and by the citation of dubious examples. One of these is the exquisitely pertinent song which Mariana's page sings to that lovely lady:

> Take O take those lips away
> That so sweetly were forsworn,
> And those eyes, the break of day,
> Lights that do mislead the morn;
> But my kisses bring again,
> bring again,
> Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,
> seal'd in vain.

Housman said that that is nonsense but ravishing poetry. Bullet admitted that it is ravishing poetry but said certainly that it has a plain prose meaning and is beautifully apt to the dramatic situation.

Housman calls Blake the most poetical of poets. Bullet thought that this was carrying a sound doctrine to an illogical extreme. "Sunlight is not the less sunlight when seen on the surface of a moving water, nor poetry the less practical if it happens to illuminate a body of thought." That thought, in the sense of intellection, is essential to poetry is, I hope, agreed. But it is precisely because intellection and the heavenly accident of poetry are fundamentally different in nature that there is no danger of the second being adulterated by the first; were it otherwise it would be impossible to enjoy the poetical quality of any verse containing statements unacceptable to one's intellect. Not "more poetical" but "more

purely poetical" is perhaps what Mr. Housman means when he calls Blake "more poetical" than Shakespeare; and this is to say not that Blake was more of a poet than Shakespeare, but merely that Shakespeare, unlike Blake, was more than a poet; judgment, incidentally, against which, so far as it concerns Blake, many of us would wish to appeal.

C. B. Tinker in the Yale Review (Autumn 1933) strongly attacked Housman's statements "Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not" and "Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it." Of the latter statement Tinker thought that Housman may have meant the mark of poetry is the indescribable perfection of utterance, but certainly King Lear, Paradise Lost, the Divine Comedy, would still be poetry if stripped of their purple passages.

J. Sparrow in the Nineteenth Century (February 1934) took Housman to task for his vitriolic attack on the eighteenth century poets. Sparrow thought from those whom he has most severely attacked, he has taken most substance.

G. W. Stonier in The New Statesman of June 24, 1933, came to the conclusion that by poetry Housman meant the lyric, and a lyrical quality that can be isolated for its magic in a phrase. Stonier's seems to be the conclusion of all of the other critics of The Name and Nature of Poetry.

Percy Withers in The Living Age of July 1936, wrote a personal memoir, not a criticism. He told us something about the writing of these poems. Housman wrote A Shropshire Lad in eighteen months, the first half dozen before he had set foot in Shropshire. Most of the poems were composed during

afternoon walks. The final verse sometimes took a three weeks' struggle to complete. He was influenced by "Old Ballads," Shakespeare's Songs, and Heine. He had studied these intensely before a line of A Shropshire Lad had been written.

"Housman could never be garrulous, the easy and traditional exchange of personalities seemed impossible to him. . . But search his knowledge, suggest and question with discrimination, refuse defeat and the reward was converse, not brilliant but rich in information, excellently clear and incisive in expression, prompt in analogy and quotation, whether in prose or verse, and perhaps its rarest quality, judgments and opinions that were never perverse or whimsical, but the fruits of a mind trained to precision, amazingly retentive, and exquisitely sensitive to literary values."

Withers told of Housman's standards of poetry; of Shelley as maintaining the highest standard; of the original issues of Bridges' Shorter Poems as probably the most perfect single volume of English verse ever published; and of William Walson's "Wordsworth's Grave" as one of the precious things in literature.

Withers then turned to the substance of the Name and Nature of Poetry and from it gleaned the truth that Housman decided simply what was and what was not poetry by the physical response, or non, in the throat, spinal cord or the pit of the stomach.

Withers said that Housman showed his modesty by refusing to be compared to Bentley, simply saying, "Bentley is alone and supreme."

Housman cared little for music or pictures and Withers relates the

following amusing incident in regard to the chronology of Botticelli. One morning after he had exhausted Withers' supply of art: "I offered him the recently published Yashiro's Botticelli. He refused with the surprising remark that he cared nothing for Italian art earlier than Giovanni Bellini. Such an opportunity of correcting his chronology had never come before, would never come again; I smacked my lips over the temptation and resisted it."

The Name and Nature of Poetry was more severely attacked than Housman's poetry had been. The critics attacked his expressions, "Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it," "Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not," as well as other pertinent parts. From these statements the reader would assume that Housman meant that poetry does not have meaning. All great critics have agreed that the best poetry is full of meaning. Housman's verse has meaning and is written in a disciplined manner, yet he advocates that poetry be written by "mad" men. The critics are all agreed that he writes his poetry not by his own formula in The Name and Nature of Poetry, but by his own distinct self which gives it individuality. His poetry is not written by any pattern and The Name and Nature of Poetry is just another theory to which even its author does not adhere.

In response to Scott-James' request for something for publication in The Mercury he wrote, "I am obliged by your letter but my career and, it is to be hoped, my life, are so near their close that it is to be hoped they will concern neither of us much longer." It was dated April 21st,

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[15]R. A. Scott-James, "A. E. Housman," The London Mercury, Vol. XXXIV (1936), p. 101-104.

1936. He died in a Cambridge nursing home on April 30th.

"Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it." His eyes always turned to the beauty of the daffodil "that dies," and his ears to the chimes of the "bells that sound so clear" on Bredon Hill and soon will be tolling "the one bell only" for mourners. While all the time he is concerned about death it seems to be because for him life is the supremely desirable thing, mocked always by its perpetual surrender to death. He envies the lads that will die in their glory and never grow old just because they will continue to live a life frustrated by decay. Yet Scott-James thinks that the pleasing verses which he turns with such evident delight derive their major quality from just this sense, that all that is pleasurable is grievous and that no joy is a joy till it is already becoming dust and ashes. "We may be sure he derived some ironic satisfaction from writing

> 'Be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
> Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.'"

C. M. Bowra in The Spectator of June, 1936,[16] said that Housman stood for an ideal of impeccable scholarship and Bowra's remarks on his scholarship give us another view of the "man" which helps us to understand his poetry. Disagreement with his thought was a sin against him. "His anger blasted many worthy scholars. In his own sphere he neither tolerated rivals nor admitted compromise. The truth obsessed him, and he was convinced that he was more usually in possession of it than anyone else. He can hardly be

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[16] C. M. Bowra, "The Scholarship of A. E. Housman," The Spectator, Vol. 156 (1936), p. 1137.

said to further the general study of Latin in England. His standards were too high, his tastes too narrow, for others to share them. But he satisfied himself. His work was the expression of his belief: The tree of knowledge will remain forever as it was in the beginning, a tree to be desired to make one wise.

Conrad Aiken in The New Republic of November, 1936, discussed More Poems which was published after Housman's death in April of the same year. He observed that More Poems makes a total to Housman's credit of one hundred fifty-three. This addition does not change those in A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems. The three books are really one. The third volume he thought inferior to the second, just as the second was slightly inferior to the first. The thinness and bareness are more noticeable, the repetition of theme and tone more staring, the genuine felicities are certainly fewer. However, the best are almost as good as ever. Housman's limited range Aiken did not think self discipline but an actual lack of human experiences. Housman did much to encourage the idea of self discipline by his silence. He allowed it to be supposed that he had turned his back on poetry forever in order to bury himself in scholarship but broke the long twenty-seven year silence with the publication of the Last Poems. Aiken thought it juvenile for him to give the impression that the tiniest and most fragile of his verses was too exhausting for him.

He criticised the narrowness of range and smallness of output as being implicit in Housman's latest verses and termed his often praised classic perfection as pseudo-classic.

Though Housman's poems are granted to have charm, grace, dexterity, and neatness, Aiken would have them of sterner and deeper stuff. If Housman's poetry is not to be profounder, then it should be more richly and variously wrought.

Aiken accused Housman's simplicity as not being acquired by being aimed at and that Housman's sensory equipment for poetry was definitely somewhat arid.

The result of Housman's poetry according to Aiken is a charming but incomplete and essentially adolescent poetry; the questionings and despairs and loyalties are alike adolescent, and so are the thoughts and the barenesses and the nostalgic gaieties. This adolescent boyishness is a cultivated thing, a calculated falsetto. Housman is not great, but he is epigrammatic, lovely, light colored, youthful, charming.

Cyril Connolly in The New Statesman of June 16, 1937, an extract of which is published in Grant Richards' Housman 1897-1936, dared to attack Housman's poetry.[17] He felt that the people's awe of Housman the scholar had blinded them to the imperfections of Housman the poet:

> The unanimous verdict of Housman's admirers is that he is essentially a classical poet. Master of the Latin language, he has introduced into English poetry the economy, the precision, the severity of that terse and lucid tongue. His verses are highly finished, deeply pagan; they stand outside the ordinary current of modern poetry, the inheritors not of the romantic age, but of the poignancy and stateliness, the epigraphic quality of the poems of Catullus, Horace, and Virgil, or the flowers of the Greek Anthology. This impression is heightened by the smallness

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[17]Grant Richards, Housman 1897-1936, p. 363-69.

> of Professor Housman's output and the years devoted to finishing and polishing, and, not least, by the stern and cryptic hints in the prefaces with their allusions to profound emotions rigidly controlled, to a creative impulse ruthlessly disciplined and checked. This theory has seemed to have hoodwinked all his admirers; their awe of Housman as a scholar has blinded them to his imperfections as a poet.

Zabel was in perfect agreement with Connolly in regard to the influence of the Greek and Latin masters on Housman. Zabel said that Housman wrote his best poetry when he forgot the Greek and Latin restrictions and wrote from himself alone.

After placing the credit of Housman's sources, Connolly continued, "The truth is that many of Housman's poems are of a triteness of technique equalled only by the banality of the thought, others are slovenly, and a quantity are derivative--not from the classics, but from Heine, or from the popular trends--imperialism, place-nostalgia, games, beer--of the poetry of his time. A Shropshire Lad contains some poems that are unworthy of Kipling with others that are unworthy of Belloc, without the excuse of over-production and economic necessity which those writers could have urged."

Connolly thought it unfair to measure a poet by his mistakes but in a case of such a minute output it seems to him justified. He criticised him for his numerous uses of the word "lad" which occurs sixty-three times in sixty-seven poems.

Then Connolly took up his mistakes and quoted seven examples, the first being:

> Because 'tis fifty years to-night
> That God has saved the king.

and the second:

> Clay lies still, but blood's a rover:
> Breath's a ware that will not keep.
> Up, lad . . .

These Connolly thought suggest Kipling. Then he examined the good ones of which one example is:

> With rue my heart is laden
> For golden friends I had,
> For many a rose-lipt maiden
> And many a lightfoot lad.
>
> By brooks too broad for leaping
> The lightfoot boys are laid;
> The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
> In fields where roses fade.

Connolly informed us that he is told that this is the purest expression in English poetry of the spirit of the Greek Anthology, one of the things which might have been written by a Greek. Yet he says that the first line is Pre-Raphaelite; "light-foot lad" is arch, arid, insipid. He gave two of his best to be "The army of mercenaries" and "The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and his flowers."

For this review Connolly was so mercilessly criticised by Wilkinson, Sparrow, and others that he had to make a reply. In this reply he went on with his attack, however, and said that though Housman wrote a certain quantity of admirable rhetorical verse, a few beautiful lyrics and some lovely occasional lines and stanzas, there is something about him that is emotionally vulgar and shallow which is reflected in the monotony of his versification and the poverty of his diction. He believes that Housman will always have a place for his good things, in the late Victorian poetry, but

that he is at the moment greatly overrated.

Edmund Wilson in the September 29, 1937, issue of The New Republic[18] wrote an essay on A. E. Housman which he later included in his book of essays, The Triple Thinker.[19] He, like Bowra, took Housman's scholarship to task for being too narrow to achieve his desired ends. "And his scholarship, great as it is in its way, is poisoned in revenge by the instincts which it seems to be attempting to destroy, so that it radiates more hatred for his opponents than love for the great literature of antiquity. Housman's papers on classical subjects, which shocked the sense of decorum of his colleagues, are painful to the admirers of his poetry. The bitterness here is indecent as in his poetry it never is."

Wilson criticised Housman's scholarship as being the kind that is preoccupied with the emendation of texts and while he could never be guilty of the extravagances of a Gilbert Murray neither was he capable of his kind of illumination. While confining himself within the periphery of the limited sphere he has chosen for himself he has denied himself the animation of life itself.

Wilson granted, however, that he deserved the place he established for himself at the side of Bentley and Porson. He did this from his ability to combine with the most "minute and accurate" mastery of language a first-hand knowledge of how poets express themselves. Thus he is not a giver of life but a re-creator. "He is only, after all, again, discovering things

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[18]Edmund Wilson, "A. E. Housman," The New Republic, Vol. 29 (1937), pp. 206-210.
[19]Edmund Wilson, The Triple Thinker, "A. E. Housman," p. 83-99.

that were already there. His findings do not imply a new vision."

Wilson thought Housman's mind one of "remarkable penetration and vigor, of uncommon sensibility and intensity, condemning itself to duties which prevent it from rising to its full height. Perhaps it is the case of a man of genius who has never been allowed to come to growth. . ."

He attributed to his semi-monastic training Housman's failure to develop emotionally. Housman seems checked at some early stage of growth, beyond which the sensibility and intellect may crystallize in marvelous forms but after which there is no natural progress in the experience of human relationship. Wilson, speaking of Housman and the other "monastic order" of English university ascetics, said, "Their works are among the jewels of English literature rather than among its great springs of life. Alice and the Lad and Marius the Epicurean are all beings of a looking-glass world, either sexless or with an unreal sex which turns only toward itself in the mirror."

"It would not be true to say of Housman, as it would be of Fitzgerald or Gray, that his achievement has been merely to state with resignation certain of the melancholy commonplaces of experience without any real presentation of that experience in the process of being lived through. There is immediate emotional experience in Housman of the same kind that there is in Heine, whom he imitated and to whom he has been compared." (Archer vigorously denies that he imitates or borrows from any one.) "But Heine, for all his misfortunes, moves at ease in a larger world. There is in his work an exhilaration of adventure--in travel, in love, in philosophy, in

literature, in politics. Desolate as his accents may sometimes be, he always lets in air and light to the mind. But Housman is closed from the beginning. His world is not a place to be explored, but a prison which one can only endure. He can only repeat the same experience over and over and draw from it the same bitter moral."

And he has somehow managed to grow old without in a sense ever coming to maturity. He has somehow never arrived at the age when a young man decides at last to try to make something out of this world he has never made.

Stuart Brown gave an extensive review of his poetry in The Sewanee Review of 1940. He said: "As Housman's affinity in philosophy is to the naturalistic and materialistic tradition, so it is to the elegiac and naturalistic in poetry."[20] He shows his kinship to the poet of the Greek Anthology, to Lucretius and to Horace. He says there is much in common between Housman and Arnold.

He reports Housman's own theory set forth in his The Name and Nature of Poetry, "Meaning is of the intellect; poetry is not," by saying that Housman's poetry is full of meaning.

He concurs with the many others in the idea that he had a Cyrenaic philosophy toward life--that the virtues are not excellent; that is to say, the life of virtue was no guarantee either of happiness or salvation.

Stephen Spender in the Horizon of April, 1940,[21] had an article "The Essential Housman." He is a recent writer and a member of the present

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[20]Stuart Gerry Brown,"Poetry of A. E. Housman,"The Sewanee Review, Vol. 48 (1940), p.378.

[21]Grant Richards, Housman 1897-1936, "Stephen Spender," p. 369.

generation of English poets and, as such, his opinion is important to us. He thought the posthumous poems interesting but their publication is greatly to be regretted. Though they contain beautiful lines as good as any that he had formerly written "they say in a cruder form, which almost amounts to parody, what he has said before. . ." The publishing of these poems did the one thing that Housman wished to avoid--heighten the reader's curiosity about the biographical background of his poetry. "Housman wrote some great poetry if not great poems and no criticism can lessen the value of certain lines and whole poems which have an independent rightness and certainty which is beyond comment."

W. H. Auden with the school of Ezra Pound was unfavorable to Housman. He made the cryptic comment that "one must beware lest humility turns into arrogance as Housman's did." In Another Time of 1940 he spoke in a very critical way of him. Grant Richards said the adjective "unfair" applied to Auden's criticism was not strong enough.[22]

Jacob Bronowski in the Criterion of April, 1937, discussed More Poems.[23] He thought that they were the same poems as those of Housman's life time, the same thought, the same manner. They were not new but more of a different kind. This kind of poetry is taken to be spare and exact in manner and stoical in thought. Bronowski refuted this impression. He gave two poems from the latter volume that he thought as good as Housman's best in the first:

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[22] Ibid., p. 371.
[23] J. Bronowski, "More Poems," Criterion, Vol. 16 (1937), p. 519.

Tarry delight, so seldom met,
So sure to perish, tarry still;
Forbear to cease or languish yet,
Though soon you must and will.

The brisk fond lackey to fetch and carry,
The true, sick hearted slave,
Expect him not in the just city
And free land of the grave.

He said that these have pathos and bitterness but they are not stoical, nor are they spare and exact. "Cease or languish," "must and will," "fetch and carry," "the just city and free land" all go to fill out vaguely to four lines what should be said exactly in three. Housman wrote short poems but not spare poems. His poems are as wordy as the poems of Shelley or of Browning "because the ratio of words to thought in them is so high."

Bronowski thought that we cannot judge Housman until we judge the kind of thought and feeling on which he draws.

Pathos is the key word to Housman's feelings and it is the key word to his poems. His pathos lies in the to-and-fro of two sadnesses, which cannot be held together. One is the sadness of the world:

The brisk fond lackey to fetch and carry,
The true, sick hearted slave.

The other is the sadness of losing the world:

Tarry delight, so seldom met,
So sure to perish, tarry still.

The first sadness makes him wish to die:

Now who sees night forever,
He sees no happier sight:
Night and no moon and never
A star upon the night.

The second sadness makes him wish to live:

> Alas, the country whence I fare,
> It is where I would stay;
> And where I would not, it is there
> That I shall be for aye.

Bronowski thought that was false stoicism. Death is not a standard and has no bearing on how we should live. Housman's poems are pathetic poems because they are without standards. They condemn themselves to be bad. He shows contempt for his oen feelings, and then asks the reader to be moved because they are contemptible.

In 1939 when Bronowski incorporated the above paper in a chapter on Housman in his book, The Poet's Defense, he had not changed his views as to Housman's poetry but he enlarged on his original thought adding new observations, especially on Housman's essay, The Name and Nature of Poetry.

He criticised at length his The Name and Nature of Poetry in the light of Housman's own compositions. Bronowski talked of his opinion of poetry being more physical than intellectual. He quoted Housman's illustration from the Bible and compared the same feelings aroused by it in Housman to those aroused by sentences in a love letter, the news of a friend's death, the number of men who were blinded in the World War, and he concluded that Housman is not speaking of the feeling as one. He is speaking only of some feelings: those which are ruled by words, those which shake the voice. But Bronowski did not take us further and discriminate between the poetry in the Bible and the sentences in the love letter. Certainly he felt that there was a difference in Housman's meaning but he never made a clear point of the difference.

He attacked Housman's assertion that Blake is the most poetical of poets and he came to no conclusion except to say that "Whatever he meant, his meaning of Poetry stands foolishly to be mocked at by itself."

As a fitting conclusion he thought: "The matter of Housman's poems is simple. It holds to a few feelings: the feelings of love, of friendship, of honour, of bravery; and the feeling that we must look at these bravely and know that they are pointless. These feelings are not praised and they are not debated. It is taken for granted that they are in all men. And it is not debated that they are at odds with themselves. We see that they are at odds. . ." According to Bronowski Housman measures each feeling against death. Thus the steady place of death in his poetry is neither chance nor fable. It is the making of the poems.

John Peale Bishop in Poetry (1940) gave some new lights on Housman's poetry. He felt that Housman wished to correct the error in Romantic poetry and that he was a classic craftsman with his form concise and accurate. Housman does not advocate making meaning clear in poetry, and his poetry illustrates this.

The "West" that he speaks about, according to Bishop, may be the classical world, long dead, in which love such as his would not have found all the laws of God and man against him.

Housman's natural emotions were thwarted and restricted and we have only to look at poetry in the large to see that there is an honesty, a humanity that simply is not in Housman any more than it was in the world that made him.

Arnold Whitridge in The American Scholar of Autumn, 1941, discussed at length the pessimism of "Vigny and Housman." He did not think circumstances caused this pessimism but that with him it was a considered philosophy. Housman has made poetry from a strange universe in which the existence of love, of kindness, or of justice is denied. And yet he has made poetry that the world has found extraordinarily satisfying.

Whitridge thought he did this through style; that style preserves all good literature from oblivion. His poetry has no ounce of spare flesh. It is simple, restrained and utterly free from the obscurity that places so much of contemporary poetry beyond the range of the average reader. This simplicity endears him to the older generation and his intensity and refusal to compromise with life endears him no less surely to the youth.

Whitridge vigorously asserted that there is virtue in what he says as well as chiseled perfection in his styled. He teaches us that we are capable of bearing our burdens, of enduring life as it comes. Through this lesson we rise to see the dignity of human nature and the loveliness of the universe. The most scholarly of all the criticisms on Housman is that of Morton Dauwen Zabel in The Nation of June 1, 1940.[24] It has taken a half century to produce Arnold's "disinterested" critic.

Zabel said that A Shropshire Lad, coming as it did two years after Housman's poetic criticism written to his brother Laurence, caught the pathos of its generation. ". . . its accents of loss and regret are fixed

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[24]Morton Dauwen Zabel, "The Whole of Housman," The Nation, Vol. CL, (1940), p. 684.

in the consciousness of all modern readers, and its croon has been judged sufficiently precious; but the grimly disciplined poignance that forms its claim and appeal to the world, though sometimes quavering toward intimacy or revelation, remained to the end of Housman's life masked and inscrutable."

Inscrutability was the mark and habit of his character and only Robinson of the modern poets "offers a comparable figure of mute austerity." The poet admitted on an occasion that he would be quite silent if allowed to be.

Zabel thought this silence, the initial condition of Housman's poetry, was "the token of a painful diminution of personality that befell him at the outset of adult life," which caused his verse to be set from the beginning in a fixed and deliberate mold. His poetry offers no new vision, growth, experiment, or discovery. The distance of Housman from Baudelaire, Villon, Verlaine, and Heine as well as Arnold and Hardy was great. "His lyrics speak from the threshold of silence itself. Had their discipline become as absolute as the one he imposed on his practical emotions, his poems would have receded wholly into the reserve that marked Housman's outward character."

Zabel thought that, though Housman denied it, he was influenced by the integrity of structure, by the verbal and tonal unity, and by the delicate stasis of form of the Latin models; and these models gave him the "interlocking balances and inversions of phrases, the distributed reference in nouns and pronouns, the hovering ambiguity of participles, the reflexive dependence of verbs and subjects that give his stanzas their tightness and

pith." If Housman had placed into these structures a purely modern and explicit English "he would have produced a language that was continuously instead of intermittently stilted." His love of folk speech prevented his doing this and the result was a poetry which had "subtle irony of tragic suggestion, a tensile integrity of phrasing, a sense of haunting human appeals playing against the grim inexorability of law. In that medium, rising above the inertness of a formula and the desperate repression of his impulses, he wrote his finest poems."

Zabel continued with the thought that where Housman allows his lyric style to harden into inflexibility and his pessimism into despair, he rightly is most vulnerable to parody and imitation, because it is here that he becomes sentimental. Housman was at first so attracted to a sing-song lilt or chant used in such tawdry and superficial poems as "Atys, The Land of Biscay," that he came to guard himself against the music "as he guarded his emotional impulses from the appeals of common life and friendship. At both ends of his narrow lyric range, as at both ends of his emotional character, he exercised a ruthless vigilance: here from the spontaneity of feelings that had to be canceled, there from a violence of a censorship so strong that it could end not merely in silence but in the emotion of paralysis and the logic of suicide. Recoiling from instinctive music or feeling, he produced poems of an opposite extreme: of a deadly and inverted romanticism, of a pessimism so imperative and bare of realistic qualities that they produce a repellent travesty of his talent." It is only when he gives voice to the "instinctive delights of his senses, to memories of lost youth,

or to responses to nature" that he arrives at his more sincere and better pieces, "With rue my heart," "On Wenlock Edge," "Far in a Western brookland," "A Merry Guide." But when the repressed emotion becomes externalized and is released from an iron-clad vigilance he produces genuine lyric realism in "Bredon Hill," "Is my team ploughing?", "To an athlete," "In valleys green and still." In these "he resolves the hostilities of his nature to their finest delicacy and harmony, . . . and contributes exquisite poems to the English lyric tradition."

Zabel said that Housman made it unmistakable that the tragedy of his life was the realization that he was destined to live a life deprived of human love. But behind the forbidding exterior and the scholarly isolation existed the true stuff of the poet. Science and realism that enable us to see the errors or defects of men should impose the responsibility of understanding men. Housman made that understanding difficult and even inside his verse a "comparison with Baudelaire and Hopkins, Yeats and Rilke, immediately give the measure of his lower station. . . His endurance was the sign of his character, and the lyrics he wrested from grief and discipline are the mark of his true, if minor, genius." He is one of the instances of man determined to live by will alone, and his lyrics often reveal what the discipline of will does to a poet. Yet, Dr. Zabel says, "the discipline was real, and its reward came when his suppressed forces broke from him in the form of an exact and exquisite art. It saved him from langour and annihilation, and in the complete book of his songs, standing between the perils of sense and the insistence of death, are the lyrics that hold permanent beauty.

They sufficiently redeem his title as a poet. . ."

The range of Housman's critics has been great. Some have been cynically amused at the assumption that Housman the scholar could produce great poetry. Others felt that he had produced poetry that was as classical as the Greek and Roman, and as lyric as the voice of Shakespeare and Heine. All granted that it had the essence of classical pessimism and some set forth the idea that, because it was pessimism expressed, it ceased to be despair.

Most critics have agreed that his poetry in subject matter has narrow limits, but within those limits it is consummated in perfection, and lofty enough to be sublime. Its technique is finished, and its rhythms are flawless.

They class his poetry as classical simplicity. His brevity and his use of verbs and nouns to the exclusion of adornment in the form of sensuous and passionate words and phrases make for this classical perfection.

In creating his poetry he did not follow his own formula in The Name and Nature of Poetry, and whether with a conscious or unconscious will he made it from the whole poetical cloth, not alone from patterns of spontaneous emotion, no critic was able to say; but that it took the whole cloth to make his beautiful and classical lines no one is allowed to doubt.

They found his place in English literature to be unique in that he stands alone, outside of any of the cults of the age. His poetry is so alone and so perfectly chiseled as to be a silhouette against the other poetry of the epoch. It is like Greek figurines on a Wedgwood vase, rare

and beautiful. Housman aspired to no school of poetry, desired no popular recognition; wished only to be alone with his Greek and Latin masters, but the few gems that he left posterity are such rare gems that of necessity they will be brought to light, analyzed and synthesized, and in the end he will take his place among the masters of poetic creation, but so far the critics have failed to type that place or give it room in the poetic tradition.

CHAPTER III

A PERSONAL INVESTIGATION

AND A SUMMARY OF THE CRITICISMS

The years 1875-1880 correspond to a turning-point in the history of English literature, as well as in the life of England itself. About this time should be placed the beginning of a definite new period, and it can be considered as ending with the outbreak of the first World War.

The third quarter of the nineteenth century had been for Great Britain an era of unparalleled prosperity. A wave of optimism and of trust in the future of the country had risen in consequence. That optimism had created an equilibrium in its national culture. After 1875 that equilibrium was destroyed or weakened and the country was floundering. Holding on to what had been, afraid to face what was to be, there came a period of unconscious agitation for a literary renovation. Feeling, no longer accepting to be bound by the various sets of rules which had severely restrained it, rebelled against them, and attempted to set itself up as the sufficient or the sovereign principle of thought and life.

Victorian rationalism had not justified the hopes which it had raised and the creative activities of the mind were no longer willing to follow that narrow sunken road which imperious logic, from a position of vantage, overlooks and commands. In an endeavor to conquer spiritual freedom the rights of intuition are proclaimed; mysticism revived in all of its forms;

and philosophy, ethics, art, at one, through the working of a secret, psychological affinity, readily contributed to the making of a new Romanticism.

The aesthetic revival in Ruskin, Landor, and Morris was an idealistic reaction against the moral idealism and the humanitarian sensibility which had been developed by an industrial age. They drew around them a group of people from the professions of art, literature, sculpture, and architecture. Their official press organ was The Germ which had only four months' issue but which was sufficient to spread widely a philosophy in art and literature that lasted long. They believed in working each object, whether it be a poem or picture, to an absolute, uncompromising truth, to the most minute detail, from nature and nature alone. They painted from the actual human models with an out-of-doors background. They went back to the Pre-Raphael period of art for sources of inspiration because the stream at that point was clearer and deeper and less polluted with animal impurities than at any other point in its course.

In Medieval art, thought and truth are the first things and execution and beauty are the second; but in modern art execution and beauty are first and thought and truth are second. The Pre-Raphaelites were trying to put the essence of Medieval art in their works.

They did a great service to their period. They got away from the too absorbing moralistic, utilitarian, materialistic, and naturalistic tradition that had held sway in England for so long, and they paved the way for that group of philosophic, esthetic, and psychological thinkers sponsored by Pater and Wilde, and Symons, Yeats, and Eliot.

The esthetic movement went further in its interpretation of art. Its followers left behind them the Pre-Raphaelite conception of minute details of truth to nature and turned instead to sensations as their medium. Sensations in fact were their source, their tool, and their ultimate aim. They were striving to divorce art from the intellect, to make it a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibility to its subject or material. This was posited in the works of Pater and Wilde, and it led to the symbolism of Symons and Yeats.

Symbolism is the condition, one might say, of coming into the world with a ray of moonlight in the brain. The symbolist thinks intensely of life, seeing what is automatically, pathetically ludicrous, and his poetry is the language of a crisis. The ecstasy that results from this crisis is a mental transportation of emotion or sensation, veiled with atmosphere, and, expressed in a poem, becomes pure beauty, a miracle: It is not a hymn to beauty, nor the description of beauty, nor beauty's mirror; it is beauty itself, the color, fragrance, and form of the imagined flower, as it blooms again out of the page.

The reaction which began in the last decades of the nineteenth century recalls the Romanticism of the first decades of the same century. In its broad fields one sees at a glance a vast number of tendencies, personalities and works. Here is on one hand the lyrical poetry of Swinburne with its sensuous ardor and its enthusiastic cult of words; and on the other hand that of Francis Thompson, with its wondering mystical faith; the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde, and the many and various refinements, either subtle

or morbid, which flourished in the decadent close of the century. The harsh, raw naturalism was stimulated and guided by France.

By the opening of the new century the thick atmosphere of perversity and pessimism was being dispelled and the doctrines of action called back the age to a healthier meditation of broad common principles of conduct. It was becoming increasingly clear that the individual author was bound by no rule but that of his own temperament and that any desire to write or create under the guiding authority of artistic forms common to all, justified and prepared by precedents, was finally disappearing. The teeming wealth of idiosyncrasies discouraged unity and there was no moral link between critics of that age.

Into the above tumultuous changes came Housman's works. To know much about his poetry one must know something of what seems to be his definite sources. Though it is true that "source hunting" can be carried to such extremes that it becomes ridiculous and fantastic, it is also true that what an author reads, studies, and loves, as well as the environment of his developing period has much to do with what he wrote.

From Percy Withers we learn that Housman's conscious sources were Shakespeare's Songs, Heine, and the Border Ballads. He had read them intensely and studied them carefully before he wrote a word even of his A Shropshire Lad; and when we read in his The Name and Nature of Poetry his classic illustrations from the Bible and from Milton, and then carefully read his poetry, we are inclined to add Milton and the Bible. R. L. Stevenson, Andrew Lang, Tennyson, Pope, Goldsmith, Scott, George Withers,

Blake, Sterne, Arnold, and W. H. Davies, as well as the Greek and Latin authors, hold much that is related to his poetry.

Housman's tune seems to have sung itself into his auditory imagination unbidden, even at such odd moments as when he was shaving, but he has himself suggested that he owed something to the old Scottish ballads, and anyone who remembers their typical meters will know that this is so.

The most common of the old ballad forms, it will be recalled, is a question of alternating four and three stress lines. The rhyming is usually of the second and fourth lines, though sometimes the first and third also rhyme. Here is a stanza of "Mary Hamilton":

> Oh little did my mother think,
> The day she cradled me,
> What lands I was to travel through,
> What death I was to die.

Compare the above with this stanza from "A True Lover":

> When I from Hence away am past
> I shall not find a bride,
> And you shall be the first and last
> I ever lay beside.

The elements of the song are distinctly the same.

"Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it," and even though it is a line from the Bible it can be poetry if said in the right way. Housman in his Name and Nature of Poetry says that, "But no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him" is poetry so moving that he could not read it and keep his voice steady. It is reasonable to suppose that, if the Bible could move him so intensely he would find in it thoughts fitting to repeat.

In his A Shropshire Lad, I, lines 15-16, he writes:

> The saviours came not home tonight:
> Themselves they could not save.

is closely related to the line from St. Matthew xxvii, 42 and from St. Mark xv, 31:

> He saved others; himself he cannot save.

In More Poems, XXVIII, 3-4:

> Thinks, and remembers how he cleansed his heart
> And washed his hands in innocence vain.

and this from Psalms lxxiii, 13:

> Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart, and washed
> my hands in innocency.

From Shakespeare's Songs he took much inspiration. In his A Shropshire Lad, II, 1-2:

> Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
> Is hung with bloom along the bough.

from the Tempest, V, i, 93-4:

> Merrily, merrily shall I live now
> Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

In A Shropshire Lad, V, 29:

> Ah, life, what is it but a flower?

and in As You Like It, V, iii, 27:

> How that life was but a flower.

In A Shropshire Lad, XLI, 16:

> Lady-smocks a-bleaching lay.

Love's Labour's Lost, V, ii, 889:

And lady-smocks all silver white.

V, ii, 899:

And maidens bleach their summer smocks.

From Heine such lyrics as the following are definitely taken:

Last Poems, XIX, 21-22:

The living are the living
And dead the dead will stay.

A Shropshire Lad, XXVII, 31-32:

I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.

From the Greek and Latin scholars he gets the manner and sometimes the matter. He does not, however, make frequent use of an English rendering of a Latin or Greek phrase as some critics have accused him.

Then to Milton--In A Shropshire Lad, IX, 25-26, we find

So here I'll watch the night and wait
To see the morning shine.

and in Paradise Lost, v.20

Awake, the morning shines.

Thus we see that with Housman's great scholarly background he had absorbed much that came from the best of the past. Some of his most successful lyrics are inspired by Horace, Catullus and the Greek Anthology; others were equally inspired by Shakespeare, Milton, and Heine. However, except by means of imitation and absorption, there can be no originality. The great originators are those with the longest tradition behind their art. It is only through a reverent absorption of the spirit and wisdom of the past

that originality is achieved, and the more complete the absorption the more fundamental the originality. The unoriginal poet is he who accepts without absorption, whose expression lacks individuality because it is of shallow root and imperfectly realized. Despite his evident sources Housman's place in literature has been won by his own gifts of lyrical artistry and the peculiar substance of his songs.

Though the substance of Housman's poetry is in the tradition of the Romantics, in reality he has not moved far past an austere scepticism; emotionally one feels that he has a special and literary interest in the pathos of the passing of first love, the parting of friends, the loss of youth, the unpredictable and meaningless death. He seems interested in them for their own sake and not for the romantic conflict of man against society, or of man against immutable laws.

He never reached out, as Archer wished him to do, into other fields. Until the end he stayed with his rustic mood, with his lads and lasses, with his gallows heights and with his cherry blossoms, only changing his tune from one of blithe pessimism to a more explicit concern with the journey's end. His narrow range would suggest a narrowness of vital experience and for this poverty of experience in his poetry Housman came in for his greatest criticism. His range was narrow, limited by his own narrow experience and an imposed self discipline. He allowed this narrowness to dominate him so completely that it imposed an adolescence on his works that went far in crippling his essential genius.

His style has in it nothing strange. It is not altogether conventional

but it is extremely careful not to affront conventional ideas of what a poetic style should be. He is not in the class with the symbolists who seem perversely to annoy the conventionals, nor is he a strict adherent to all that the conventionals advocate.

Simplicity is, of course, the key word to his style, both in form and content, and though it is his greatest achievement it sometimes goes too far, so far, in fact, that it often reaches a point of economy as to become in a sense understatement, and often falls far short of what style really is--heightened meaning. The meaning is flat, obvious and evident, and there is lacking that magnificent grandeur which brings the unreasonable excitement which is a necessary reaction to good poetry.

It is "unadorned simplicity." But not in the works of a single great critic do we find an urgency for the abandonment of adornment; maudlin, sentimental lushness, yes; but classical adornment, no.

Blake, whom he so much admires, sings his celestial tune through suggestives, sensory nouns, and verbs of action; Shakespeare gives ravishing poetry through nonsensical lyrical achievements made with sensory perceptions; Collins, Christopher Smart, and Cowper reach the eminent heights of good poetry through madness, and Housman, in his The Name and Nature of Poetry, quotes Plato: "He who without the muses' madness in his sould comes knocking at the door of poesy and thinks that art will make him anything fit to be called a poet, finds that the poetry which he indites in his sober senses is beaten hollow by the poetry of madness."

His simplicity, however, more often achieves success than results in

failure. It is the result, perhaps, of his long training with the Greek and Latin scholars. He learned to discard every ounce of superfluous flesh; only the essential framework was there. But that essential framework consists of expressive verbs, adjectives, nouns, instead of sensuous phrases and colorful expressions.

> And fields will yearly bear them
> As light-leaved spring comes on,
> And luckless lads will wear them
> When I am dead and gone.

Only two mild descriptive adjectives and one descriptive adverb in this.

Now let us look at this stanza of Swinburne's:

> . . . ways of loving, all of them:
> A sweet soft way the first is; afterwards
> It burns and bites like fire; the end of that
> Charred dust, and eyelids bitten through with smoke.

"Sweet soft," "charred dust," "like fire," "bitten through with smoke,"--sensuous adjectives and phrases.

> I heard that very cry go up
> Far off long since to God, who answers here.

"Far off," "long since," "very cry go up,"--Though this is, perhaps, some of Swinburne's best it approaches monotony with its lushness and its lack of conciseness. Housman's poetry does not sprawl. It stays concise and accurate. And while he may not have the energy that Swinburne and Yeats possess, he uses what he has with such concentration and intensity that it produces the desired poetical effect. His adjectives take the place of concrete images and when he does use images, which is seldom, it is for ef-

fect on a somewhat grander scale.

The rustic commonplaces of his poetry are the natural outgrowth of his early associations. His youth was spent among the "cherry blossoms," in "the happy field of hay," awaiting "the light-leaved spring," meeting the "morning beam," driving the "ploughing team," marching "to the wicket with bat and pad," listening to the song of "the bird with the yellow bill," telling the hour with the dandelion, watching the ebbing of the sunset trail. There is hardly a stanza that is not suggestive of some rustic paradise, some rustic experience recalled with nostalgia.

This nostalgia is the result of a life whose expectations have been fulfilled, expectations that were realistically unhappy, expectations of human sufferings grave and constant. Housman assumed the attitude of defeatism. His own life does not bear an example of this defeatism. When he failed at "Greats" he went to work and did something about it; but his poetical feelings are those of a man who expects defeat to prevail regardless of what is done about it.

> In battles of no renown
> My fellows and I fell down,
> And over the dead men roar
> The battles they lost before.

"The battles they lost before" suggests that it is always the same--the battle is never won. The cards are stacked against him from the beginning. The best he can do about it is to prepare himself for the worst:

> 'Therefore, though the worst is bad,
> Stand and do the best, my lad;
> Stand and fight and see your slain,
> And take the bullet in your brain.'

and:

'Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill.'

He uses the commonplace colors, flowers, and sounds characteristic of the season; the yellows, greens, aqua, golden, azure, the dew, the daffodils, the buttercups, the primroses, the rising sun, the song of the storm cock, the notes of the blackbird, sound of the bells, the jingling of the harness are the spring; the russets, wild green woods of summer, dark blues, evening, the fruit, skies of evening clouds, tall flowers, lowing of the cattle, are autumn.

Arnold's influence was perhaps the only definitely critical one felt in the first part of Housman's period of compositions and by his standards let us for a moment look at his verses.

According to Arnold, the highest poetic qualities lie in the matter and substance of the poem and in its style and manner. The matter and substance of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness; and style and manner in the accent which is given by their diction and their movement. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner.

When Arnold gives as his definition of poetry "a criticism of life" he bars Housman, to a certain degree, from the great classics. Housman was too much aloof from life to criticise it with the impartiality of a true critic.

But when Arnold adds that criticism must come from a person with poetic truth and high seriousness of purpose, he would cover the very essential characteristics of Housman's poetry and Housman himself.

Arnold denied Burns a place in the great classics because Burns falls short of the high seriousness demanded by the poetic standard. Burns' poetry, though often a criticism of life, Arnold says, is, on the other hand, local and ironic. Here we stop to ask ourselves the question: Is Housman's poetry not local and ironic?

A Shropshire Lad is local and yet universal. Shropshire runs through every line of it and yet that Shropshire is a beautiful place, a place that could be found in any corner of the world. Hence it loses its identity with one small place and becomes the property of all places:

When smoke stood up from Ludlow,
And mist blew off from Teme,
And blithe afield to ploughing
Against the morning beam
I strode beside my team.

. . . . . .

'Lie down, lie down young yeoman;
The sun moves always west;
The road one treads to labour
Will lead one home to rest,
And that will be the best.'

Certainly Ludlow and Teme are local but when we come to the last three lines "The road one treads to labour. . .", we do not remember that. This is a symbolic road that can be found in France's valleys, on America's prairies, on Russia's plains.

Housman, like Gray, lived with the great poets,--above all, with the

Greek and Latin, through consistently studying and enjoying them; and he caught their poetic manner. He demonstrates this in his style and manner as well as his truth and seriousness.

> Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough
> The land and not the sea
> And leave the soldiers at their drill,
> And all about the idle hill
> Shepherd your sheep with me.
>
> Oh stay with company and mirth
> And daylight and the air;
> Too full already is the grave
> Of fellows that were good and brave,
> And died because they were.

Certainly the precise lines, the mastery of each word to a simplicity that is unexcelled, brings to mind the ancient Greek and Latin poets. They believed that any adherence to what was later to be Housman's own impression (that poetry should come only from a frenzied emotion), was far afield from literary accomplishment and should have no recognition by the literary world. For them, that accomplishment was the work of the mysterious underworld and boded no one good.

Arnold was, as Housman, a scholar and a disciplined one. In his "Study of Poetry" Arnold says:

> We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry.

But, he adds:

> Even if good literature entirely lost currency with

> the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of monetary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,--by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.

Housman, according to Arnold's standards, is a poet. He meets his test of substance and matter and style and manner. His poems have the simple substance and matter that becomes epic by being universal; and his style and manner flow smoothly like a wheat field before the wind.

Housman spanned that wide gap from Arnold to Blackmur, Wilson, Winters, and Eliot. His first volume, A Shropshire Lad, came in 1896 and Last Poems in 1922 and between these two dates much had happened to literature, much that proved true Arnold's statement.

These twenty-five years were perhaps the greatest experimental years in the history of English literature. They were years of radicalism, of unshackled liberalism in art and thought, and into the end of it stepped Housman's Last Poems, which was Arnold's true type of classic poetry.

By this time, however, Arnold was almost forgotten and the reading public was demanding in their poetry a passing poignant moment of enjoyment and an ability to feel differently about each poem; Last Poems did not satisfy this demand. Each poem offered the same enjoyment, and the last volume contained the same poems as the first.

Zabel demands of his poetry a quality which Housman did not have. "Poetry, . . ., like the moral life, is an art of concrete conditions whose style and strength are realized when conceptual or ethical abstraction is

tested by vital experience." Never did Housman lose himself in abstract human suffering; never did he rise to elegiac grief over the lads who died in foreign fields for his country. His human relations were too vitally limited. Suffering for him was something read about but not often experienced.

The poets of the latter age were feeling things, experiencing things,--Crane, Eliot, Sandburg, and Robinson--and they met the world with a style and language recognizable as its own--one which Housman rarely succeeded in mastering.

Housman's best poetry cannot be defended in terms of his own criticism in The Name and Nature of Poetry. This criticism alone would imply that by 1937 he, perhaps, had somewhat changed with the times, but everywhere upon the body of his works is the evidence of limitations imposed upon his essential genius by a conscious aestheticism which was crippling to it. That "conscious aestheticism" had been the outgrowth of his inability to rub shoulders with his fellow man and the best of his poetry was achieved in spite of this immediate handicap.

This study has attempted to show the causes of the delay of recognition of Housman's poetry. Physical changes internally and externally in the United Kingdom were responsible for a complete change in the literary traditions of England. The influences of French growths and standards on the English mind was not the least of these causes. It has attempted to place Housman in relation to the standards set up by these various changes; to trace his growth parallel with the rapid and tumultuous fluctuations of

literary minds; and to apply to him the degree of honor and recognition granted him by the various critics of the period.

Of A Shropshire Lad the criticisms summed up to be: it is curiously simple, expressive, and original verse that has pure diction and a personalized method with language that is unadorned precision, uncontorted truth. This poetry gives vivid pictures that have continuity, sturdy vigor, and pervading melancholy.

The Last Poems brought forth more praise of A Shropshire Lad than had that volume itself, and it called forth a storm of protest that the poet had dared to spoil A Shropshire Lad by adding to it. Some, like Drinkwater, contended that Last Poems was as good as, and more consistently good than, A Shropshire Lad and, though the old manner was found in it, his work was none the less assertive because he happened to have done it before. Sapir made the individualized comment that Housman's Last Poems was concerned too much with the journey's end, its sudden strangeness denoting omens rather than pictures, and the pessimism which in A Shropshire Lad was an explicit futility, a nicely cherished disgust, in Last Poems had become "too sweet to smart."

Up to now there has been a general agreement that Last Poems should never have been written. The change in criticism had become definite; the New Verse was having its day. The impressionist had vanished, leaving only works as a marker; the symbolist had changed his symbol and was having a revival with a different starting point.

Around the middle of the third decade of the nineteenth century there

came another reaction in criticism. This was indicated by R. P. Blackmur's Double Agent, Edmund Wilson's works, and Morton Dauwen Zabel's essays and criticisms. These three as well as Bishop,[1] Whitridge,[2] and Brooks[3] have taken the middle of the roadway. They realize that criticism is a serious business to be confused neither with sensational journalism nor subjective analysis, but with the essence of the poetry, arrived at by thorough investigation, penetrating the poetic words, patterns, and structures of the work. Their manner is that of Arnold's disinterested, sensitive critic and their investigations of Housman's works gives us a picture of fine lyrics produced on one side by a man more poisoned by hate for his enemy than love for the literature of antiquity, and on the other by a pathetic unloved personality, too aloof to experience human relations necessary for the creation of the greatest poetry.

His verse has left its appeal to the youth of 1900 and shifted itself to the critic of 1940. Today the poetic reason for studying him is not of so much importance as the personal and psychological reasons. They have made of him a subtle and ennobling lyric dignity which makes him of greater interest to our present school.

Edmund Wilson thought him not a recreator. He said that if Housman were not capable of the perversities of a Murray neither was he sufficiently

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[1]John Peale Bishop, "The Poetry of A. E. Housman," Poetry, Vol. 56 (1940), p. 144.

[2]Arnold Whitridge, "Vigny and Housman--A Study in Pessimism," American Scholar, Vol. 10 (Autumn 1940), p. 156.

[3]Gilbert Benjamin Brooks, "A. E. Housman's Collected Poetry," Nineteenth Century and After, Vol. 128 (1940), p. 71.

equipped for their illumination. He thought Housman's mind condemned itself to duties which prevented it from rising to its full height.

Housman did condemn himself to duties which suppressed his thought, but he was no recreator. He absorbed his sources and they were then his. With them he did not recreate but created anew. The final result had little resemblance to the source; certainly they were not recreations.

Aiken felt that his classic simplicity was achieved without being aimed at and he and Connolly accused him of being adolescent in his simplicity. Connolly went far to prove that his poetry is arch and insipid, and declared that though it is unfair to judge a poet by his mistakes, in the case of Housman where the output is so minute the mistakes take predominance.

In his Leslie Stephen Lecture, The Name and Nature of Poetry, Housman says that "to transfuse emotion--not to transmit thought--is the peculiar function of poetry." This statement provoked much of the discussion that has been on Housman's own poetry. "Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not," "Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it."

It would seem that Housman had set out to prove that his own works are not poetry. ". . . who are the English poets of that age [the eighteenth century] whom pre-eminently one can hear and recognize the true poetic accent emerging clearly from the contemporary dialect? These four: Collins, Christopher Smart, Cowper, and Blake. And what other characteristics had these four in common? They were mad." There is not a line of Housman's poetry, except, perhaps, his youthful nonsense verses, that is not severely impregnated with thought. It would have been impossible for him to write a

line that did not contain thought. Was Housman trying to tell us what he liked to read? Was he indulging in his emotional reactions to something necessary as an outlet to his own enforced self restrictions?

To begin with, most of his critics have been in agreement that he did not follow his own formula in his composition. Regardless of the fact that he may have had to drink the pint of beer to resolve one line, that line when finished was not the result of a madman but was a finished, precise lyric jewel. To compose he did exactly what he credited the eighteenth century poets with doing, he "girt up his loins and essayed a lofty strain at the bidding of ambition" and wrote poetry that was not neo-classic in either form or content, but that was very romantic in its individuality.

Norris said that only one who has a great zeal for life can be a great pessimist. All of his critics agreed that he was a pessimist. Drinkwater made the enlightening observation that his pessimism born of despair was dispelled by being expressed; that his tragic mood was less tragic because he was able to give it to us in terms of an "exquisite poetic art." Scott-James said that all that is pleasurable is grievous and no joy is a joy until after it becomes dust and ashes.

The intensity concentration, accuracy, conciseness and sensitivity in Housman's poetry was readily conceded by all of his critics, but some made the very pertinent observation that energy, a necessary element in poetry, was lacking. Most all of his earlier critics closed their eyes to these shortcomings, but his later critics, Eliot, Zabel, and Wilson have been disinterested and have brought them boldly to task.

The criticisms without an exception have deplored his narrow range, but almost all of them have granted the consummated perfection within that range. This perfection, a result of a romantic temperament, made vivid by a cultural storehouse of memories, resolved itself into lyric verse that was simple and universal. The narrow range only heightened the value of this perfection.

His poetry offers no new vision, growth, experiment, or discovery. It is genuine lyric realism, and though the pessimism that pregnates it gives it a feeling of fatalism, it suggests a virtue, the virtue of a courageous outlook on a life that offers nothing but defeat. As life holds so much more ill than good, be prepared to meet the ill and the good will be sweeter. He says over and over again that life is short and cruel, that lovers are fickle and that brief recompense for the harshness of man's lot comes with a glimpse of natural beauty or the solace of a song.

His plea for the functionlessness of art and of scholarship is the cry of a man for whom civilization has lost its value-patterns, his idealism is that of one who is without ideals except his own integrity, the only real belief which he held. All other values had dissolved and though the cause of their dissolution may be his failure at "Greats," his change of Latin ideals, or some thing that he held as an unspoken secret, it imposed upon his compositionsa restriction that is not beautiful; and this restriction prevented him from doing what Archer long ago wished him to do, to reach out into broader fields of thought, explore the muses' foreign heights.

He gave us some perfect poetry, sensitive, concise, and intense, and in this he gave us the virtue, that we are capable of bearing our burdens, of enduring life as it comes.

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